MAPPING EXPERIENCES OF EXCLUSION
OF STUDENTS WITH A LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

REPORT

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This report has been compiled and edited by Comparative Research Network e. V. on behalf of the Dig-2-Inc project consortium.

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Introduction

The present report summarises results of the five mapping studies conducted by the academic partners of the Dig-2-Inc project consortium. These mapping studies have been designed to throw a light on the experiences of exclusion of students with a low socio-economic status (SES) and the social circumstances underpinning their feelings of not being included in the academic community. The participatory approach adopted in this context has been aimed at creating a safe place for a dialogue between these students and the academic staff (teachers, instructors, study counsellors, etc.) accompanying them in their academic life. Its main goal has been to identify key themes evoked by the students when talking about their experience.

This short introduction is followed by a presentation of the methodological background of the investigation. The main part is then dedicated to summing up the activities undertaken at the five universities, a description of the profile of the students who participated in them and the leitmotifs that emerged from a collaborative interpretation of the data collected. The conclusion will summarise the findings and link them to the wider goals of the Dig-2-Inc project.

Methodological Background

The mapping studies have been inspired by techniques of community reporting, in which members of a community are working together to collect data on specific issues by conducting a survey or recording interviews. The results are then edited and interpreted in a collaborative effort to produce a community report for wider consumption.

In the present case, selected project participants (academic staff and students) familiarised themselves with the basic principles of recording and editing 'snapshot' and 'dialogue interviews' on digital inclusion with the help of smartphones during a three-day training organised by Comparative Research Network in February 2023. Both kinds of interviews are started with an open question that encourages interviewees to freely tell their story. The recorded interviews were then summarised and key quotes extracted. In addition to technical advice on recording video or audio stories, emphasis was put on the voluntary

participation of community members, who have to be informed in detail about the way the stories will be used and have at all stages of community reporting the choice of withdrawing their consent, asking for rectification, restricting the processing of data collected from them and of deciding to whom these may be disseminated.

Mapping Students' Experiences of Exclusion

The results of the five mapping studies undertaken will be presented separately for reasons that should be obvious. Each of the participating universities is operating in a distinct national environment, has its own characteristics (e.g. public vs private universities, the need or not to pay tuition or admission fees, different pedagogical approaches, varying forms of support). Students' experiences of exclusion tend therefore to emphasise different aspects of their academic life because these will necessarily differ.

Furthermore, the voluntary nature of the students' participation in these studies has resulted in rather heterogenous samples of participants whose profile may vary with regard to age, gender, their personal situation and other factors. Some of the academic partners have, moreover, experienced considerable difficulties in their attempts to recruit students willing to tell their stories, obtain their consent for recording them and even more to allow these recordings to be made available to a wider audience. A certain self-selection bias is therefore inevitable. Students have also decided what to reveal of their experiences and how they wanted to frame their stories. The data collected and analysed are thus neither systematic nor exhaustive and cannot be compared directly with each other. The main aim has been to gain insights into the difficulties students with a low SES are facing in their educational trajectories by opening a dialogue between them and members of the academic staff in view of providing them with better support and empowering them to successfully pursue their academic career.

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Burgaski Svoboden Universitet, Bulgaria

At the Free University of Burgas, a private university, interviews have been conducted and recorded with twenty first-year students with a low SES from the Faculty of Human Sciences. The participating students (one fifths of them male and the rest female) belonged to the following age groups:

Table 1: Number of interviewed students by age group

Age group	Number of interviewed Students
20 years or younger	4
21 to 24 years	5
25 to 29 years	6
30 to 34 years	3
35 years or older	2

At the outset, the students and the lecturers participating in the activity were informed about the project, its aims and objectives, its approach and the expected outcomes. The recorded videos were uploaded to a share point for later analysis.

Five volunteer students (two male and three female) and five lecturers (2 male and three female) were then trained in community reporting and took part in the subsequent sense-making session. This edu-jam started with a general discussion on how to make the university more tolerant and to facilitate the academic integration of students with a low SES. Participants then watched the videos and took notes before discussing them in a plenary session. Two smaller teams composed respectively of lecturers and students thereafter analysed videos in more detail and extracted key statements. These results and the way they had been reached were then presented in a final plenary session.

In the course of the edu-jam the lecturers identified four main causes why the interviewed students experienced difficulties in their studies.

1. Financial difficulties (video #1): These are on the one hand due to insufficient funds to pay for the tuition fees. Students may live with a single parent and as full-time students do not have time for gainful employment. On the other hand, students are facing high costs for transport between their home and the university and experience difficulties in affording temporary accommodation.

2. Conflicts between studies and work (videos #3 and #10): Commitment to the learning process suffers from job constraints. Students who work shifts, for example, are unable to attend scheduled lectures. If working students neglect professional obligations they risk economic losses, because they are unable to accomplish tasks required of them or to retain clients. More generally, work often leaves little time for learning.

3. Conflicts between the learner and their employer, supervisor or manager (videos #4 and #18): At their workplace, students receive insufficient support from their employers who manifest little understanding for constraints arising from their studies and are not prepared to accommodate them. University education is not seen as something that might also benefit the employing organisation.

4. Conflicts between studies and family obligations (videos #2 and #5): For mothers in particular there are few opportunities to reconcile their academic obligations with raising children.

The participating students emphasised four slightly different key themes.

1. Financial difficulties (video #1), which were mainly attributed to the high tuition fees.

2. Difficulties reconciling different roles (videos #5 and #12). Employers, for example, do not provide for study leave when necessary. Or today's grandparents are unable to support young parents in raising children, because the retirement age is now higher.

3. Intensity of the academic training (video #7): Distance learning includes block modules from morning to evening during a two-week period, as a result of which students feel exhausted, lack time for other personal commitments and generally find it hard to switch from work to study mode.

4. Long and difficult commuting (video #6). Some students travel several hundreds of kilometres a day to attend lectures or participate in exams and often experience great fatigue in the context of an already busy schedule.

During the second plenary discussion, the participants agreed on the four following key themes, which are here illustrated with quotes from the video interviews:

1. Financial difficulties (e.g. expensive tuition fees; lack of scholarships for students of private universities; high interest rates for student loans).

   'I live with my mother. I am not financially independent. (...) The university fees are high.' – 'Completing university (...) will allow me to integrate into society, empower me, be more successful, help my mother. (...) I will be more self-actualised.' (video #1)

2. Work-studies balance (e.g. learning interferes with work requirements and vice versa; conflicting time schedules):

   As I said, I am from abroad. I have two children born in Bulgaria, but the problem is that we don't have babysitting grandmothers. My wife is travelling out of the country. And this is my main problem – the children – I have no one to leave them to.' – 'The most important thing is to prove to myself that I will succeed.' (video #5)

   'I have a little kid who got sick last semester and there was no one to look after him and I couldn't come because I had to stay at home to look after him:' – 'I just had to choose to stay with my child or come to university. I just didn't have much to choose from because there was no one to watch it.' – 'The speciality itself is interesting to me and that motivates me to attend the lectures.' (video #8)

   'I have a daughter who has a break dance competition today. We have a very strong relationship, and my support is very important to her. And today I choose to be here.' – 'I live 100km from Burgas then I have at least an hour's drive waiting for me. And I will be in a big hurry. I have to choose between this time with my daughter and this time at university.' – I am motivated by wanting to gain this knowledge. I have always dreamed of studying this. I think I have to deal with it. My other big motivation is the example I set for my daughter.' (video #12)

3. Difficulties related to the curriculum (e.g. overlong study days during the distance-learning phase, which leads to tiredness and lack of time off for other personal commitments, difficulty to switch from learning to other activities).

   'We don't even have a day between lectures to rest. (...) After today's lectures I am not able to be fully at the university.' – I am here because I am fulfilling my childhood ream. Psychology has always been my great love.' (video #7)

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4. Distance between home and university (e.g. long commutes, high costs for transport or temporary accommodation).

    'During the previous attendance exams (…) I left in the evening. I hadn't slept till the morning. So to go to the exam I then had to travel another 450km to come back … When I'm here I have to rent accommodation and take my vacation. And when I don't have work I don't have money' – 'Realisation at a later stage (…) then to enrol for a master degree to have an education.'

The table below shows the percentage of students who mentioned one or several of these topics in their testimonies.

Table 2. Share of students mentioning one of the named topics (in per cent)

Topic	Share of students mentioning the topic
Work-study balance	85%
Difficulties related to the curriculum	35%
Financial difficulties	30%
Distance between home and university	20%

To sum up, students of the Free University of Burgas most often evoke difficulties of reconciling their studies with other commitments, especially if they are obliged to work or are raising children. These problems can be exacerbated by long trajectories between their home and the university. Under these circumstances time management becomes challenging, and students risk missing out on lectures or other academic tasks or have to neglect other obligations, which might lead to or aggravate already existing financial problems. As one of the consequences they frequently report feelings of fatigue and exhaustion. The need to work ties, of course, in with the students' financial situation, which is said to be precarious because of the high tuition fees, on the one hand, and the lack of scholarships or low-interest student loans, on the other. In the absence of support from other family members such as grandmothers, poorer students who are parents are also constrained because they cannot afford to pay for childcare. Economic hardship thus appears to be a common underlying factor. Completing their academic studies is

often quoted as a central life goal or dream. In this context there seems to be little that university staff are able do to support these students except to alleviate pressure by giving them more leeway and flexibility to accomplish study tasks.

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University of Turku, Finland

Attempts to recruit voluntary participants for the mapping study at the University of Turku, which started in the early summer of 2023 and continued until the end of the year, met with considerable difficulties. Early on, the local team decided to expand their efforts to other Finnish universities, notably engaging with over 500 students at the national Humak University of Applied Sciences and approximately 100 Communication Sciences students at the Tampere University. Additionally, the Tampere office of the Finland Futures Research Centre reached out to about 50 students from the region, though this effort yielded disappointing results. By late 2023, a total of 21 stories had nevertheless been recorded, two from teaching staff at the University of Turku, nine from university students, including two from Tampere, and ten from last-year upper secondary students from Turku, all female, about to apply for admission to universities or universities of applied sciences. One interview had to be discounted because a signed consent form had not been returned.

Unfortunately, most of the students recruited were unwilling to consent to video recordings, which were then replaced with audio recordings, and did not want their stories to be used in any form other than for research purposes. For this reason, only a small number of interviews are available for educational purposes or for dissemination on an e-learning platform.

The team analysing the videos subsequently identified ten key themes, the great majority of which are focusing on the learning situation.

1. Creating positive learning spaces. Several stories highlight the importance of positive and open encounters with educators. In a supportive environment, students feel empowered to share their thoughts and experiences, fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas. Positive interactions with teachers contribute to a more engaging and enriching educational experience, promoting student confidence and active participation.

   'She [the teacher] is just a very approachable person. She usually sits in the same table as the rest of the group and we have a like a circle of discussion in which she also participates. That has made myself very self-confident to share my own examples and to apply theory in my own life.'

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2. Empathy in teacher-student relationships. Empathetic encounters with teachers showcase the importance of understanding and validation. Students appreciate educators who not only share knowledge but also acknowledge their experiences and ethical views. Empathy fosters a deeper connection between educators and students, creating an environment where individuals feel heard and understood.

   'I got to talk to someone who ethically agrees with things or somehow maybe validates their own experience of what things are important or some of my own frustration with the way things are.'

3. Impactful teacher encouragement. Positive experiences with teachers who provide encouragement and support can significantly impact a student's attitude towards learning. Constructive discussions and motivation contribute to a more enjoyable educational journey. Teachers who go beyond traditional roles and actively support students emotionally and academically contribute to a positive and supportive learning environment.

   'My Swedish teacher always found new ways and motivated me even when I was having a really bad day.'

4. Collaborative problem-solving. Collaborative efforts between students and teachers to address challenges, such as organising events or managing conflicts, underscore the importance of open communication and mutual respect. Effective collaboration fosters a sense of community within educational institutions, creating an environment where both teachers and students actively contribute to problem-solving.

   'What makes the interaction situation good is the openness and quick connection between students and teachers. Mutual respect and the desire to find a common solution are essential in a good interaction.'

5. Navigating challenges in group dynamics. Unpleasant teamwork experiences reveal the challenges students face when collaboration turns sour. Effective leadership and teacher intervention play pivotal roles in resolving conflicts and ensuring a conducive learning environment. Therefore, there is a need of ability to navigate and manage conflicts within a group setting is crucial for creating a positive and constructive learning atmosphere.

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'I immediately got the feeling that it wasn't okay how I was treated, and that they were sorry. I got the feeling that I dare tell in the future if there are any problems.'

6. Digitalisation's varied impact. The stories highlight the evolving nature of digitalisation in education, from initial challenges to eventual acceptance. While digital tools bring convenience, there's a struggle to find a balance and a longing for traditional learning materials. The integration of technology in education requires thoughtful consideration, acknowledging both its advantages and the importance of maintaining a diverse learning environment.

   'We got the licenses, and all the books were digital. Now that more time has passed, I kind of miss the paper books, not having to stare at the computer screen all the time.'

7. Evolution of digital learning. The evolution of digitalisation in education is evident, with students adapting to various digital tools at different stages of their studies. Understanding the evolving nature of digital learning helps educators implement technologies more effectively, considering the needs and preferences of students.

   'But when you entered upper secondary education, suddenly everything was on the internet and online. The biggest shock was having to do maths on a computer. It was just shocking to get used to being on the computer for several hours a day.'

8. Recognising students' struggles. The stories also shed light on the challenges or problems students face, such as exhaustion, uncertainties about continuing studies, and the need to take breaks due to overwhelming challenges. Acknowledging and addressing student struggles is essential for creating a compassionate and supportive educational environment.

   'During the second year, I had to take a few months sick leave because I got really bad exhaustion and couldn't do anything. Now that I got a bachelor's degree I'm going to work and one day, if it's possible, I'll do the master's degree, but at the moment I don't see myself doing it.'

9. Family support and living arrangements. Living situations impact students' financial stability. Those living at home often have additional support, while others must navigate financial challenges independently. In other words, family support plays a vital role in a student's educational journey, influencing financial stability and the overall experience.

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'I live at home, so my parents pay for a lot of my expenses, so I don't have to work. For people who don't live at home, the situation is probably very different.'

10. Financial struggles and work-life balance. Many students face financial challenges, leading them to take up employment alongside studies. The impact of this dual commitment on academic performance is recognised, emphasising the need for sufficient financial support. Financial struggles can significantly affect a student's ability to focus on their studies, highlighting the importance of adequate financial aid to ensure equal opportunities for all.

'I have to go to work. Student and housing allowances alone are not enough to pay the rent.'

'The study support isn't quite sufficient to cover my expenses when I'm living on my own. I go to work approximately four or five times per week. It does affect my studies, because I may not always be able to be there for the lessons. And to some extent to my ability to cope. It's ok, because I need the money.'

'I have to go to work. Student support alone is not enough. Of course, it does make a difference if you are actively studying and working at the same time.'

'After a few months, I realised that even though I was raising student loan, student grant and housing allowance, it wasn't enough to live in a big city.'

What is striking in these testimonies is that these extracts from the narratives are, with few exceptions, optimistic in tone. If difficulties are evoked they mostly lie in the past and have been successfully overcome or solved, either through the help of teachers or other students, or by the narrators themselves in the course of a learning process. Other difficulties, such as having to work a lot with digital documents, are rather described as an unfamiliar experience but not as unsurmountable. The financial difficulties mentioned by several students are generally attributed to higher expenses, especially for rent in a big city, than the disposal income stemming from student and housing allowances or a student loan allows – Finland has only public universities that do not charge any tuition or admission fees. In cases where a student is working this is widely perceived as interfering with their studies,. Of course, all interviewed students appear to be very young and the financial problems experienced may be

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due to having to cope, for the first time in their life, on their own with a limited budget, possibly in an unfamiliar environment, such as a big city. Parental responsibilities are rare. According to Statistics Finland, the average age for women giving birth to their first child is 29.6 years, while men typically become fathers at around 31.2 years. Consequently, most university students tend to delay starting a family until after graduation and securing stable employment. In 2022, for instance, the average age at which women married for the first time was 32.5 years, compared to 34.3 years for men.

More generally, most statements emphasise positive learning experiences or at least outcomes. A recurring theme among the students' stories is the crucial role of positive and open encounters with educators. Quotes from the stories highlight the profound impact of an inclusive atmosphere, where students feel empowered to actively engage in discussions facilitated by approachable instructors. The dynamic exchange of ideas fosters a collaborative learning environment, contributing to a more enriching educational experience. Furthermore, effective leadership and teacher intervention are spotlighted as essential components in managing unpleasant teamwork experiences, showcasing the importance of conflict resolution skills in maintaining a conducive space for collaboration.

Empathy emerges as a cornerstone in teacher-student relationships. Beyond the transfer of knowledge, educators are portrayed as individuals who validate students' experiences and ethical views. These empathetic interactions deepen the connection between teachers and students, creating an atmosphere where individuals feel heard, understood, and supported, thereby enhancing the overall educational journey.

The impact of digitalisation on education unfolds as a narrative thread, capturing the evolution from initial challenges to eventual acceptance. While the convenience of digital tools is recognised, there is a noticeable challenge in striking a balance, as some individuals also express a longing for the use of traditional learning materials. This dynamic evolution of technology in education necessitates thoughtful consideration to ensure a harmonious integration that caters to diverse learning preferences.

Financial struggles surface as a prevalent and significant theme, prompting students to balance work commitments alongside their studies. The narratives shed light on the impact of

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this dual commitment on academic performance, underscoring the imperative for sufficient financial support to ensure equitable opportunities for all students. Collaborative efforts between students and teachers in addressing challenges, organising events, or managing conflicts emerge as valuable experiences, highlighting the importance of open communication and mutual respect in problem-solving within educational institutions.

Living arrangements play a pivotal role in students' financial stability, with those residing at home often benefiting from additional support from the family. Conversely, other students must navigate financial challenges independently, shedding light on the varied support systems that shape a student's educational journey. The stories also show that students deal with tough things like feeling really tired and not being sure if they can keep studying. This highlights the importance of having good support systems to help them through these difficulties.

In conclusion, these narratives collectively underscore the importance of recognising and addressing the diverse experiences and challenges faced by students. This understanding is integral to creating an inclusive, supportive, and enriching educational landscape that fosters holistic development and prepares students for the complexities of the modern world. (e.g. an inclusive collaborative learning environment, leadership and empathy of teachers and their intervention).

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University of Burgundy, France

In addition to the collection of testimonies, the local team conducted a simple two-part survey, to which 32 students from the university, mostly from the IUT Le Creusot, responded. When asked whether they have encountered or are currently experiencing difficulties in their university studies, 18 students answered in the negative, eight responded with a 'Yes' and six declared not being sure. Respondents were then were then presented with a list of inequality factors identified by previous study and asked whether any of them concerned them. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Which of the following inequality factors identified by previous studies do concern you?

Health (physical/mental)	11
Financial situation ('I have to work.', 'I have a very tight budget.'	10
Geographical location ('I live far from my place of study.'	5
Ethnic origins ('I don't speak French very well.', 'Reception in France is complicated.'	3
Sexual orientation / gender identity	1
Sex	1
Digital skills ('I am not good with computers.')	0
Access to digital devices ('I don't have a computer.', 'I have a PC for the whole family'	1
None of these factors	14

It should be noted that some students who answered the first question with 'Yes' then declared that none of the above-mentioned factors concerned them, that among those who responded with a 'No' some then checked off one or several factors and that students who answered 'I'm

not sure' either selected one or several factors of exclusion or declared not being concerned by any of them. One student spontaneously added the issue of sexual orientation / gender and another, the only female student in her class, mentioned sex as a factor.

During the community reporting session, 20 students and two non-students were interviewed. Five students and 4 staff members of the CMQ-E ITIP (Campus des Métiers et des Qualifications d'Excellence 'Industries technologiques innovante et performante'), an official regional counselling network of educational institutions, were trained in the method. Twenty-four participants were awarded Open Badges 'I participated in the Dig-2-Inc Study' and nine 'I Master Community Reporting'. (Note: Open Badges confirm the acquisition of skills, knowledge or competences that are not recognised by a formal diploma or certificate.)

The analysis of the recorded video interviews was conducted by six members of the CMQ-E ITIP team, including one student, and one student who had been interviewed and trained in the community reporting method. The team members started by viewing the videos and filling in individual analysis sheets before meeting for a short plenary session. They then proceeded in four steps to list non-verbal aspects observed, key themes mentioned in the interviews, the key contents of each testimony (how and why) and finally identified four key themes (what) and four key contents while dressing a list of exceptions. A final discussion and the collection of feedback ended the day-long activity.

The results of the analysis are presented below in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Key themes identified In the videos (number of occurrences)

Finances	29
Administration	23
Pedagogy, teachers	20
Digital access	16
Orientation	14
Work-study balance	14

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Learning difficulties	13
Mental health / motivation	13
Geographic location	12
Social aspects	10
Study access	10
Comfort and environment	9
Ethnic origins, language	8
Physical health	6
Professional opportunities	6
Transition from countryside to city	3
Access to internships	2
Work-study contracts	1
Sex	1

Table 5. Key content identified in the recorded video interviews /number of occurrences)

Lack of financial support	27
Lack of pedagogical flexibility and adaptation to students' needs	18
Administrative complexity and inefficiency	18
Lack of guidance support	16
Lack of support for foreign students	11
Difficulties accessing digital materials	10
Lack of psychological support	10

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Lack of social life linked to the city	10
Lack of individual support, identification of difficulties	9
Poor quality of the education	7
Lack of awareness of learning problems and other factors of exclusion	6
Difficult labour market or access to work-study contracts	5
Lack of access to some schools (fees)	5
Poor quality of distance learning	5
Lack of training for using digital tools or dealing with technical issues	4
Lack of support for the transition to employment	4
Concerns about the quality of the accommodation	3
Non-recognition of diplomas obtained abroad	3
Lack of public transport	3
Lack of future prospects	3
Non-harmonised study programmes across territories	2
Issues of accessing information	2
Difficult work environment for student jobs	2

The most prominently mentioned themes in the testimonies have been identified as 1. finance, 2. administration, 3. pedagogical approach and teachers, and 4. digital access. But if we look at the long list of grievances, these cover almost every aspect of student life. The absence of

certain themes, such as family obligations, suggests that the sample consists largely of students who are young adults. The strongly expressed demand for more support may be more specifically linked to the fact that many of the participating students are in a phase of transition to adult life where they have to assume, possibly for the first time in their life, numerous responsibilities, ranging from managing a tight budget to dealing with administrative formalities or finding an internship or job. Here students with a low socio-economic status are likely to receive less help from their family because of limited financial resources, less familiarity with academic life or a less extensive social network. Stronger individual support from university staff seems therefore highly desirable to them.

Università Telematica Guglielmo Marconi, Italy

Unimarconi is a private distance-learning higher education institution that has many students who are residing in various regions of Italy, including remote areas. Consequently, assembling these students in a single physical location for the mapping study posed significant logistical challenges. To explore issues related to the low socio-economic status of students, participants for the study were selected after preliminary desktop research among students who had abandoned their studies or requested temporary suspension.

Despite a general willingness to provide feedback, most students contacted expressed considerable reluctance to consent to the recording of video interviews, citing privacy concerns or discomfort with the technology that would be used. Some of those who expressed reservations were, however, prepared to submit written statements or to allow audio recordings. The testimonies of twenty students have been used for further analysis, ten in written form and five as audio or video recordings respectively. The participants were primarily Italians aged 25 to 45 affected by their low SES status, living across the country and in some cases abroad. Among them were young parents or people who have faced, or are facing, challenges balancing their studies and work or family responsibilities. Many invoked health issues or an unstable family environment leading to feelings of isolation as reasons hindering their ability to effectively integrate into the university environment. Financial constraints, family obligations and limited access to resources were common themes mentioned. In addition, participants frequently expressed a sense of not belonging to their academic environment, a feeling attributed to the perceived distance and unavailability of teaching staff unwilling to acknowledge personal issues students are facing.

In the following we present the key themes that emerged during the analysis of the students' testimonies and illustrate them with quotes.

1. Financial strain. Participants often struggle with financial instability of their household, making it difficult for them to afford tuition fees or textbooks and to cover other educational expenses. Many of them have to work part-time or full-time jobs to support

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themselves and their families, a situation that further limits their ability to find time and energy for academic pursuits.

'I have a daughter, I am a single mom with an unable job. I have little time to study.'
(audio interview #1)

2. Family responsibilities. Many students with a low SES are taking care of elderly parents or disabled family members. This makes their everyday life stressful and unpredictable because it requires them to be available at all times to meet the needs of the persons they care for. Moreover, they often small children who demand a lot of time and attention. Balancing these responsibilities with academic demands can be overwhelming and result in feelings of exhaustion and burnout.

'I started to be a caregiver of my mom who has Alzheimer. Managing this unstable situation, making plans day by day, minute by minute based on the disease ... There is no possibility to plan the studies. Going on with the studies became a fatigue even from an economic point of view.' (audio interview #2)

'Having to take care of a disabled mother and a father in difficult health and financial condition ... I found myself bring up my son, while looking for a new job and suspending my studies.' (audio interview #3)

3. Health issues. Physical health issues affect students' ability to regularly attend the lessons on a daily basis, especially when living in a remote area while mental health challenges, such as ADHD, dyslexia or depression, may hinder students to be academically successful.

'No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't achieve good results, and when I sought advice from various teachers, the only response I received was that I needed to work harder. This was quite demoralising for me. I started working out of financial necessity, and after the first year, I dropped out of university, feeling incapable because all the immense efforts and sacrifices seemed to lead to nothing.' (written statement #3)

'I have Tourette's Syndrome, OCD and a mood disorder. I was admitted to child neuropsychiatry at the age of 11 ...' (written statement #7)

4. Lack of academic support. Encountering difficulties in accessing academic support services or struggling with teaching methods perceived as ineffective may lead to feelings of insecurity and disengagement from studies.

'I encountered difficulties in keeping up with my studies and attending classes because very often the professors didn't make the subject matter engaging, and it seemed like they were just there for the sake of it.... It had become more of a struggle than a joy, all because I didn't have a proper study method taught in the past... A much more humane approach with the students is needed to help them understand the material. Academic insecurities stem from there.' (audio interview #4)

On of the students started university at the age of twenty and moved to another region to register at the university and found herself living alone, far away from her family.

'I feel inadequate to the university environment... The professors go ahead at the lesson expecting that you already know the previous thing ...' (video interview #5)

5. Institutional barriers and lack of support. Policies conceived as inflexible and inadequate support systems further prevent academic progress by not accommodating the diverse needs of students with a low SES.

'I can't forget a girl in tears after the teacher interrupts her and says "Miss, I don't see how you could be my colleague in the near future. I invite you to withdraw." In all this there is obviously personal life, which does not always go well. Moments of crisis, family problems, situations of discouragement, stress. However, none of these variables are contemplated by the university system.' (written testimony #8)

'I am an "old" student, I am 39 years old and have three children, in addition to a job. [I would prefer] more virtual classrooms where exercises can be performed together to facilitate interaction and dispel doubts.' (written testimony #5)

'I think career is as important as the studies, so I decided to pause [with] my exams and focus on the career and getting a contract ... At that time the pandemic started and there were a lot of uncertainties on how to access the exams, so one more reason to pause.' (video interview #2)

6. Work-life balance. Students with a low socio-economic background often work full-time jobs to support themselves and their families and find it hard to cope at the same time with academic requirements. Long commutes and irregular working hours further exacerbate this difficulty.

'Pursuing a university career presents many obstacles for a family with a medium to low income, and the life of an out-of-town student becomes almost unbearable with high rents, bills, tuition fees, and all the expenses that a typical 20-year-old incurs.' (written testimony #4)

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'I always had to work throughout my academic journey… Difficulty in balancing work with study, especially when one works full-time… Transportation, due to living far away, is often delayed.' (audio interview #5)

Another student enrolled at university at the age of 38 while working full- time. It was her third degree which she decided to pursue because of her interest in the subject. However, she realised that she was too tired to study in the evening, look at the screen after having spent a whole day in front of a computer. Living alone without any support she had no time to prepare for exams. She also became aware that she had lost her study habits and lacked the necessary concentration, so she eventually abandoned her studies.

'I stayed in front of the screen all day, then I would come home and had to open it again…. Sometimes I don't feel like to see even a film, to avoid staying in front of the screen.' (video interview #3)

7. Personal circumstances and external factors. A life crisis or family problems, as well as societal factors, significantly influence the academic journey, particularly when the academic staff shows no understanding or is not supportive.

'Studying after the age of 40, amid work shifts, family, illnesses, and worries, is a different story. In those brief moments when I spoke with the professor, asked questions, and later reviewed the written exam responses, I understood where I could improve, the details that mattered to the professor. The following month, I retook the exam and my grade was four points higher than the previous one.' (written statement #9)

Another student enrolled at university at the age of 46 during a period of unemployment and while going through a divorce.

'It's not always easy to find time to study. Sometimes, I find myself studying at 5 in the morning.' (written statement #1)

'I had to look for a house again, face moving again, with all the fear of not making it. I found myself with rent, bills, university fees, psychotherapy …' (written statement #6)

Low SES students face multifaceted challenges in university, including financial strain, familial responsibilities, health issues, lack of academic support, institutional barriers, and difficulties in balancing work and study commitments. Addressing these challenges requires a

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holistic approach that involves implementing targeted interventions and creating a supportive campus environment.

Universities should prioritise the needs of low SES students by providing financial assistance, expanding academic support services, implementing more inclusive teaching practices, and fostering a supportive campus environment. Additionally, policymakers need to address systemic issues such as income inequality and lack of access to healthcare and social services.

Technical University 'Gheorghe Asachi' of Iași, Romania

For the interviews conducted for the mapping study, the TUIASI team recruited 32 participants (61% of them female and 39% male) from three universities in Iași: seventeen students and two lecturers from the Technical University 'Gheorghe Asachi', six students from the 'Alexandru Ioan Cuza' University and seven students from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy 'Grigore T. Popa'. All students were in their first to third year of studies and Romanian citizens, except one from the Republic of Moldova. Table 6 below shows the number of interviewed participants by age group.

Table 6. Interviewed participants by age group

20 years or younger	8
21 to 24 years old	16
25 to 29 years old	4
30 to 40 years old	3
40 to 45 years old	1

All interviews were stored as video or audio files on a share point for further analysis. Subsequently, three lecturers and ten students, with both sexes about equally represented, were trained in the community reporting method and participated in an edu-jam session of sense-making, documented in Romanian and English. Participants in this session watched the videos and took notes before comparing them in small teams and creating summaries and identifying key topics. During a plenary discussion, they presented their results and how they arrived at them. As a result, they agreed on the following four main themes followed by the frequency with which they are mentioned in the video and audio interviews in per cent and illustrated by quotes extracted from the video and audio interviews.

1. Difficult integration into the university group (44%). The reasons invoked were of a varied nature, including lack of confidence in personal strengths and knowledge because

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of earlier difficulties during their educational trajectories or of their family background. Female participants also stressed the role of gender in the enrolment at a technical faculty mostly frequented by men.

'The behaviour they have towards other peers who come from other high schools or better backgrounds.' (audio interview #2)

'Coming from a rather isolated background, inferiority complexes were the first to emerge.' (audio interview #3)

'Us girls, to prove that we have what they seek and succeed in integrating ourselves among guys we had to work harder.' (audio interview #4)

'There were another 3 girls in the dorm, 3 different characters.' (video interview #2)

'As obstacles I can say that the first time I studied I didn't find my balance and I did a lot of some things and too little of others.' (video interview #12)

'I think that I was …an introvert and living like that was not what I wanted.' (video interview #17)

'Coming from a rural environment, encountered problems such as internet connection.' (video interview #18)

2. Difficult adaptation to city life (28%). Participants who grew up in small and remote villages find it difficult to cope with public transport, the ambient noise and crowded spaces in which it is difficult to move.

'I didn't know the city of Iași.' (video interview #2)

'What made me quit the first time was being young and coming from a small town.' (video interview #12)

'I could feel this transition from small town to big city.' (video interview #16)

3. Online classes during the covid pandemic (52%). First-year students in particular described the lack of interaction with peers and teaching staff during the period of restricted contacts aș a reason why they experienced difficulties in adapting to academic life, in terms of both the quality of learning and the human contacts. Internet connections, particularly in small towns and rural areas were poor, and students from large families often lacked devices or a dedicated space to attend online classes.

'The pandemic prevented us from making friends.' (audio interview #1)

'Student life in the online environment started on the wrong foot.' (video interview #1)

'There was a lot of chaos. I didn't know what was going to happen.' (video interview #5)

'It was very complicated aș everything happened during the pandemic.' and 'I had difficulties because I did not feel a person in front of me, I did not have a normal conversation.' (video interview #8)

'Coming from a rural environment, I encountered problems, such aș [the quality of the] internet connection' and '[The problem] solved itself … I had no help from anyone.' (video interview #11)

'I was afraid to answer in classes because I could be interrupted by my family.' and 'During the pandemic it was difficult to attend classes.' (video interview #13)

As part of the work, the edu-jam team created the following empathy map of the experiences during the pandemic:

Figure 1. Empathy map reflecting students' experiences during the pandemic

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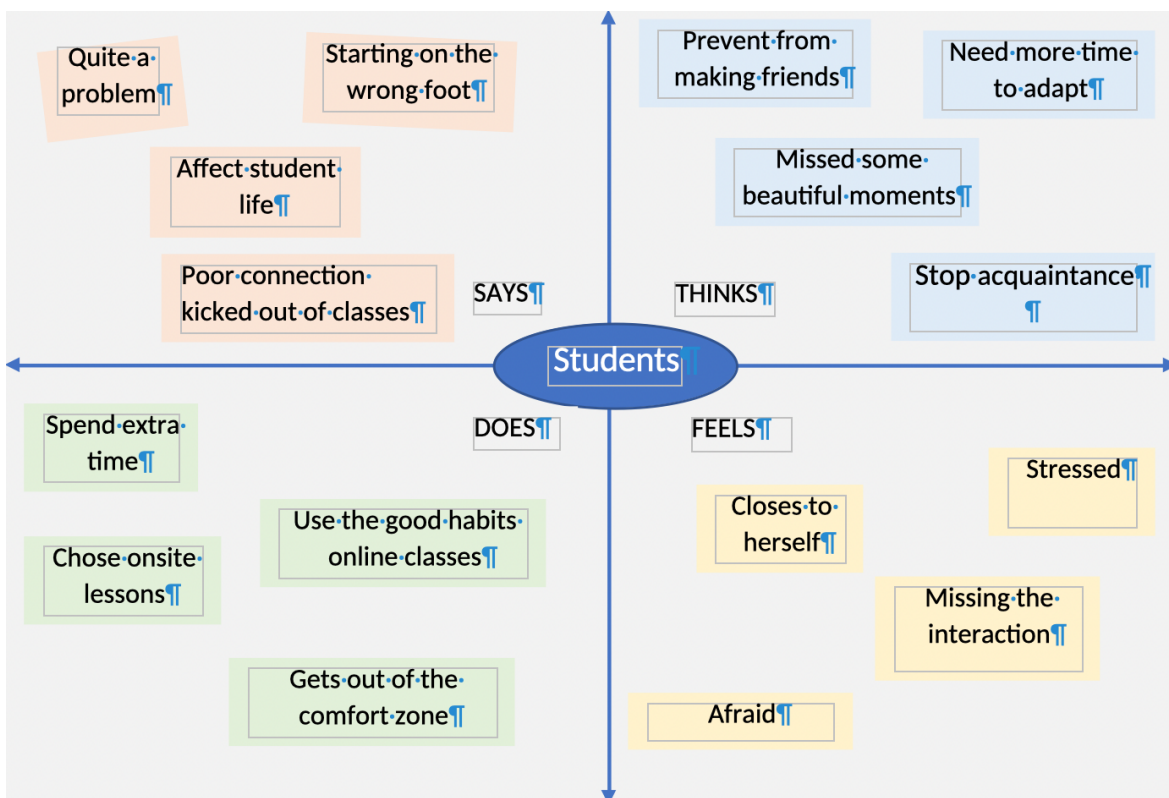
4. Financial difficulties (40%). Financial problems have led some students to suspend their studies for a time or to take up a job to be able to cover expenses. They also affect their relationships with peers at university, make it harder to adapt to academic life and may lead to a loss of self-esteem.

> 'The behaviour they have towards others peer who come from other high schools or better backgrounds.' (audio interview #2)

> 'We were being kicked out of classes because of the connection.' (video interview #10)

> 'I had to go through ten years of work to realise you can't evolve aș a person with finishing university.' (video interview #15)

> 'I didn't have a technical part that could support my performance.' (video interview #14)

The most frequently mentioned topic are difficulties encountered during the covid pandemic followed closely by those associated with social integration into university life. Indeed, the pandemic seems to have significantly worsened the students' prospects of a smooth transition to academic life, because of the social isolation which lock-downs enforced upon students, who were unable to form relationships with peers and find support with them or from university staff, and an unfavourable study environment at home (e.g. lack of digital devices and infrastructure, no dedicated workplace). Educational, social and spatial segregation appear to play an important role, as students report feelings of being discriminated against because they had frequented a less prestigious high school than others or were coming from a rural area. Female students invoked gender as a discriminatory factor. As a result, students declared that they lacked confidence, in part because of earlier negative educational experiences. The transition to student life seems particularly difficult for poorer students from remote rural areas, as they were, for instance, unfamiliar with various aspects of urban life (e.g. crowed spaces) or university life (e.g. accommodation in dormitories). Economic poverty appears as an aggravating factor.

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Conclusions

The results of the mapping studies presented above clearly show that the experiences of exclusion reported by the participating students and academic staff tend to have a different focus at each university, reflecting different national and institutional settings but also varying profiles of the students interviewed. At the same time, similar underlying conditions lead to similar experiences. At the two private universities, for instance, high tuition fees and other study-related expenses are, needless to say, among the crucial financial challenges students with a low SES are facing, often resulting in the need to work during their studies. On average these students are also older, 'mature' students – more than half at the Free University of Burgas and all at Unimarconi are at least 25 years old – compared to the other samples and the student population in OECD countries in general; on average, four out of five students are entering higher education before the age of 25 (OECD 2019).Financial difficulties are, indeed, among the main reasons why students delay their higher education, the other most frequent reasons being stricter admission criteria, such as a *numerus clausus* and selective entry requirements *(ibidem)*. Higher age often goes hand in hand with difficulties to reconcile academic studies and conflicting other responsibilities, such as supporting a family through a job, raising children or, more specifically in Italy's family-centred care system, looking after elderly parents in poor health or family members with special needs. Students' parents in this case are likely to be older too and may be less able to support them financially or otherwise. This kind of personal situation may also explain why these students have chosen a distance-learning institution or accept long commutes between their home and university. As a consequence, they may suffer from greater social isolation in the academic community, have fewer opportunities to exchange with fellow students or to contact teaching staff, and need greater self-discipline to successfully pursue their studies. Under these conditions the required learning process can become overwhelming.

By contrast, participating students at two of the three public universities, the University of Burgundy and the Technical University (and other universities) of Iași, are reporting

experiences of exclusion that seem more linked to the transition from pre-academic life, in most cases at the family home and the protected environment of schools in the general educational system, to academic life. (The Finnish students emphasise different topics but almost half of them had not yet entered university at the time of the interviews and their socio-economic status is less certain.) When we discount for the time being references to the period of the Covid pandemic, almost half of the Romanian students interviewed evoke financial difficulties resulting in the need to take up employment or, worse, to temporarily suspend their studies, but also minor problems of paying for study-related expenses. About the same share associate their experiences of exclusion with a variety of factors, where differences in status (e.g. family, social, geographical or educational background) play a major role in feeling insecure. Unfamiliarity with and unease in an urban environment among students from remote areas are a particular aspect of this. The reported problems were exacerbated during the Covid pandemic when students found it much harder to build relationships with peers or were struggling because they could not use the university's digital infrastructure during lockdowns at home. Many of the problems mentioned seem to be related to greater absolute economic poverty when compared with France and Finland, where students pay no tuition fees, benefit from a more generous welfare system and have had the benefit of a wider social experience before entering higher education.

The long list of grievances dressed by the French students, a Cahier des Doléances so to speak, concerns almost all practical aspects of student life. The data presented do not allow us to tell whether these complaints are of a general nature or referring to specific experiences. But they leave the reader with the impression that the academic environment appears hostile and dysfunctional to students with a low socio-economic status, full of barriers and offering little if any support when needed. Navigating the academic system is perceived as a major challenge by these students. There seems to be an underlying mismatch of expectations where students feel lost and look for support while the university counts on largely autonomous adults, who are meant to cope on their own with any difficulties that may arise. In this context, students with a low socio-economic status may be at a considerable disadvantage because they are less likely

to be able to rely on support from their family or social network, whether it is for financial assistance, help with administrative formalities, learning difficulties or other issues.

The kind of support and positive learning environment described by the Finnish students interviewed, almost half of them still at school, seems to be more characteristic of secondary schools where teachers more often provide individual support and are in part held responsible for the scholarly achievements of their students. In Finland the general conditions also appear to be better than in the other countries, thanks to a system of student and housing allowances, state-guaranteed low-interest student loans, other welfare payments and the absence of any tuition or admission fees for national citizens and those with an equivalent legal status, although here, too, a significant share of students declare to have taken up a job to cope with high living costs.

The problems of adjusting to academic life faced by younger low-SES students at the two public universities in France and Romania may be partly transitory and due to a necessary phase of adaptation to a yet unfamiliar academic life. A more efficient support system for these students should not only benefit them but also ensure a more efficient use of resources available to universities.

Financial strain and difficulties to reconcile work and study requirements are mentioned by students of all samples, though not by all students, along with problems resulting from these factors.

Critically, all the factors mentioned in the five mapping studies by students or academic staff are also key reasons why a significant share of students leave university before completing a degree, which constitutes the strongest form of academic (self-)exclusion. According to somewhat older data from 2008, about a third of students in seven selected European OECD countries never graduated, with particular high rates (55%) in Italy (OECD 2008). A German study (Heublein et al. 2017) on the decisive and main contributing reasons given by students for dropping out of higher education thus lists the following respective shares, which may be compared to the results of the mapping studies presented here (see Table 7 below). It shows the similarly overlapping of reasons and confirms also that financial reasons and family obligations become more important over time and with the student's age.

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Table 7. Shares of a single decisive and main contributing factors indicated by student dropouts

of tertiary education in Germany (n = 6029)

Factor	Share of respondents naming it as the decisive reason	Share of respondents naming it as a main contributing reason
Insufficient academic performance	30%	75%
Lacking motivation	17%	71%
Desire for a more practical activity	15%	63%
Financial reasons (financial strain, work-studies conflict)	10%	36%
Health and wellbeing	11%	18%
Alternative career opportunity	6%	25%
Study conditions	5%	61%
Family obligations	4%	15%

The mapping studies will be completed by edu-jams organised by four of the five academic partners, during which low-SES students and academic staff will collaboratively attempt to come up with proposals for improving the digital inclusion of the target group. The results of these edu-jams will be published in a separate report.

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